

“Can but Won’t” 1 Corinthians 8:1–13
Epiphany4B 1-28-18

Thirty-three years ago I called the pastor who would supervise my vicarage, the year-long internship in my third year of seminary training. The first thing he said to me was, “I am an alcoholic.” He was well into recovery and was a wonderful mentor for me. Because he told me that up front, I knew right away what boundaries I would observe around him. Though I could drink in moderation, around him I would not drink at all. Whenever we are allowed by God’s law to do something that may tempt another person to sin, love will move us to say to ourselves, “Yes, I can, but, no, I won’t.”

This applies to more than our behavior around those addicted to alcohol. As a fan at a ball game, you have the right to be obnoxious and yell at officials whose calls you don’t agree with. As a Christian, while you have you have that right, it might not be right to use it. Whom would your behavior influence? Young people, like your own children? A fan struggling with anger control? Someone with a low opinion of Christians? I can yell at the referee, but no, I won’t.

In Corinth, it centered on the weakness of faith around the issue of meat sacrificed to idols, whether it was eaten at a secular event at the temple, or bought at the market.

Some of the Corinthian Christians were puffed up by knowledge. They said, “We know those are false gods. We know the idols are just wood or gold or stone. We know there’s just one true God. We know this food isn’t going to get us any closer to Jesus or push us further away. It’s just plain food, for those idols don’t really exist anyway. We can eat this meat.”

Yes, they could, without sinning, but at what danger to those who were weak in their faith? Paul says, “Yes, you can eat this meat, at least in the privacy of your home, since you know the idol is a fake, and you don’t mean to worship it.” But later in Chapter 10 he says, “No, you can’t be a part of those temple meals, even for just a social event. That gives the wrong public witness to those who are struggling to stay faithful to Jesus.

But what about when you’re with other people at your home or eating at church as a congregation? Can you eat the meat that had been sacrificed to idols then? Well, here

the principle we started with comes into play, “Yes, I can, but, no, I won’t because it might hurt someone I’m with.” They might think eating the meat that was sacrificed to idols means it’s okay to worship the idol too. Out of love for the one who could stumble, even though you could, you don’t.

Paul ends up with, “Yes, I can because it’s not forbidden or commanded one way or the other. I have this freedom in Christ to do it. But sometimes I won’t eat the meat for the sake of my brother or sister in Christ.”

Where does this apply in your life? Let’s say you are with someone who struggles to engage some activity in moderation, such as drinking alcohol, listening to certain kinds of music, eating, gambling, shopping, spending time on-line. In moderation, it is not inherently sinful, but for your friend who lacks self-control, it could lead to drunkenness, gluttony, or actions prompted by old memories that would harm himself or others. With some people, or by yourself, you could do those things, but with that person, you don’t.

If you are like me, you have been guilty of not exercising my freedom in a loving way. Maybe we didn’t think about what we were doing, or worse, didn’t care. We cared more about rights than about being right.

Paul has good news for us. Jesus, who died for our brother or sister in the Church also died for you and me. Jesus could have used his freedom to say, “I’ll just stay in heaven and not worry about the people in need of forgiveness.”

But for us He came to earth, and the beatings and the bloodshed of the cross. His own body was the meat offered to the true God as the final sacrifice for sin.

Now, Jesus offers to us what he himself sacrificed when He reconciled us to God. In His supper of bread and wine, we find forgiveness and strength to love others as Christ first loved us.

As Jesus has sacrificed himself for us, he wants us to sacrifice our rights for others. So, we practice our freedom, not enslaved by the assertion of our rights, but liberated by love that says, “I can, but I won’t”. Amen